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ABSTRACT

The relatively new phenomenon of using search committees is described as the result of state and federal legislation, a more participatory approach to college administration, and an enlarged pool of qualified candidates. Committee functions include recruiting and screening candidates, checking references, handling interviews, and making recommendations. The need for good "fit" between institutional requirements and individual expectations emphasizes the importance of an effective search committee. Time and money are two factors that can limit search committees. Pre-search guidelines include the need for such things as a genuine understanding of the institution, a search committee membership that is representative of the college or university at large, precise charge to the committee, and definition of clearly stated qualifications that candidates must possess. (LB)

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ERIC DIGEST

84-2

COLLEGE SEARCH COMMITTEES*

*A digest of "The Role and Effectiveness of Search Committees," by Jane Doyle Bromert (ED 243 355)

The use of search committees has burgeoned so rapidly on most campuses that few schools have developed a rational, systematic method for organizing such efforts. Properly conducted, the search process can be an important tool for increasing the effectiveness of an academic unit or institution. Effective procedures for recruiting, screening, and nominating candidates for positions in higher education are essential to institutional vitality (Kaplowitz, 1983). If hiring is carried out in a haphazard, chaotic manner, the results can be disastrous.

A NEW PHENOMENON

Search committees are a fairly recent phenomenon in higher education. Their growth is the result of state and federal legislation affecting faculty and staff members, a more participatory approach to college administration, and an enlarged pool of qualified candidates.

For years, boards of trustees have used search committees in an advisory capacity to select chief administrative officers. Representative constituencies, including faculty, staff, students, alumni, and the community-at-large, were gathered to assist in finding the "perfect" administrator, including the president or chancellor. This method was infrequently used for the selection of faculty or other professional staff. Anecdotal evidence indicates that many people were chosen through informal systems, which often included "old boy" networks.

Many argue that "old-boy" systems still thrive in academe. However, today that approach is inadequate and inappropriate because of affirmative action legislation, the greater numbers of people (particularly women and minorities) competing for jobs, and the increasingly complex task of running colleges.

THE COMMITTEE'S FUNCTIONS

Even though search committees have become popular in higher education, they do present problems. Search committees have been used to circumvent affirmative action mandates or to validate decisions already made. Many in academe can relate horror tales about present-day searches. Beyond that, faculty union contracts, the internal policies and politics of an institution, and the personalities of individual committee members vary with each setting. Thus there are legitimate differences of opinion about the validity of search committees and how best to use them.

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While it is impossible to develop a formula applicable to all situations, a basic format can be established.

On the surface, a search committee's functions seem uncomplicated. Normal functions can include:

- preparing a description of academic needs and responsibilities
- recruiting candidates
- screening applicants
- checking references
- participating in preliminary interviews, and
- recommending a pre-determined number of persons to a designated administrator who makes the final selection.

The process, however, is more subtle and varied than appears on the surface.

NEED FOR "FIT"

The need for good "fit" between institutional requirements and individual expectations emphasizes the importance of an effective search committee. Recently, rising tenure ratios and the impact of retrenchment have reduced the yearly number of faculty and administrative openings. Although openings are still available, particularly at the administrative level, there seems to be a two-year turnover rate (Jacobsen 1983). Some of the turnover is probably attributable to personal or institutional dissatisfaction. Often, this dissatisfaction can be traced to persons discovering that the reality of their position differed significantly from the original job description, or to the university or college finding that the person they hired did not "fit" the particular position or institutional philosophy.

TIME AND MONEY

Evidence (Lutz 1979) justifies the need for more effective search processes in higher education. Two critical considerations for limiting search committee results are time and money. One study of presidential searches (Nason 1980) reports what is at stake. Nason's research, which involved two- and four-year public and private colleges and universities, showed that the time investment ranged from one day to to 24 months. Moreover, the basic time-consuming elements of presidential searches are applicable to any search committee.

The amount of money spent on the search process should prompt

committees to make the process more effective. Nason found that the median direct cost of a presidential search (in late 1970's dollars) are:

• 4-year public college	$ 8,500
• 2-year public college	4,000
• private university	18,600
• 4-year private college	7,500
• 4-year church-related college	3,000
• 2-year private college	3,000

It is relatively easy to determine the level of some of these expenditures, such as advertising, postage, telephone, travel, meals, and consulting contracts. However, indirect costs, including the time of clerical assistants and committee members, though sometimes hard to determine, can be high and should not be ignored. Overall, Nason found that the median direct cost of a presidential search was about $6,000, with the most costly to be $55,000. Regardless of these variations, all search committees must be given adequate resources and time, as well as sufficient forethought and direction to do a good job.

BEFORE THE SEARCH STARTS

Researchers have set forth guidelines on how colleges and universities can best secure people to fill open positions. Effective results may depend heavily on what Kelly (1977) terms "pre-search" activities. These include:

- a genuine understanding of the institution by search committeee members;
- search committee membership representative of the major groups within the college community served by the position;
- search committee membership representative of the college or university at large;
- a precise charge to the committee clearly defined at the outset and adhered to steadfastly;
- definition of clearly articulated qualifications that candidates need to satisfy for consideration, especially those based on the long-term needs of the institution and its setting.

THE SEARCH

The "search" process--with the possible exception of the interview--is a somewhat mechanical, standard procedure. It can never be put into motion smoothly, however, unless a firm foundation for an effective search process has been laid in advance. When that is done, the search process can be a positive tool to enhance institutional effectiveness.

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